

WSDOT's Employee Stories: December 2007 Storms

WSDOT Maintenance Worker Waits Out Night Slides

Connie Rae has been a WSDOT maintenance worker for more than 20 years and has never seen anything like the storm that hit Monday morning.

Rae was called in at 10 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 2, to monitor the highways in the Mt. Walker area. At 3 a.m. the storm hit full force. Rain fell heavily and Rae's two-way radio chirped nonstop with reports of problems while she traveled in her truck. At about 6 a.m. Rae was heading north from Holiday Beach on US 101 where the road had closed because of a slide. She managed to make it to milepost 325, just north of Carroll Point, but couldn't get through. Fearing for her safety, Rae returned to Lilliwaup.

"This is the worst storm I've seen in my career," said Rae. "I don't normally get scared out on the road, but I was scared this time."

All night slides happened around her while she sat in her truck. She stayed there until daybreak, fearing that she could be swept away by a slide. Eventually she moved to a wide area in the highway and other citizens joined her there, trying to avoid the slides.

Other WSDOT crew members cleared a single lane on the highway at about 1 p.m. and Rae and the other members of the public could drive to safety. Rae couldn't believe all the devastation around her. More trees were coming down as she tried to return to WSDOT's maintenance yard. She was able to get to the yard and go home at 4 p.m.by material shortages in the future.



WSDOT Crews Injured When Tree Falls on Truck

Monday Dec. 2 Ray Helvey and Darrell Medley, WSDOT maintenance workers, were on patrol south of Forks when they decided that it was too windy for them to work safely. They returned to WSDOT's maintenance shed in Forks.

They then went north of Forks to patrol roads. While patrolling northbound on US 101 around milepost 210 they came upon a tree that blocked the road and decided to cut the tree and push it aside to get at least one lane open for motorists. The wind was relatively calm and a car sat on southbound US 101 on the other side of the tree waiting to get by. Ray and Darrell pushed the tree off the road with the plow truck. They were backing up when another tree fell on the cab of the truck.

The roof of the cab collapsed. Even with the tree on the roof, the truck continued to back up and special effort was needed to stop it. Darrell got out of the truck through the driver's side window and Ray was trapped on the floor. The private-vehicle driver came to their aid and pried the passenger door open enough to allow Ray to get out of the truck.

The driver drove the crew members to get medical attention.



Crews Reopen US 2 Through Tumwater Canyon

No one can recall 58 avalanches in Tumwater Canyon at one time." Area 1 Maintenance Superintendent Rick Wood added, "Especially coming in the space of an hour." Those avalanches did slam down onto that ten miles of US 2, east of Leavenworth starting around 2 a.m. last Monday morning (Dec. 3). By 3 a.m., the highway was closed and 3 semi trucks and a state trooper's cruiser were stranded between slides.

Leavenworth maintenance called in reinforcements including the avalanche team. By 4:30 a.m. the drivers of the four trapped vehicles had been rescued, but their vehicles would stay put until the avalanche activity stabilized.

Tumwater Canyon got 8 inches of snow on Saturday and another 16 inches on Sunday. When the temperature rose from the low teens over the weekend to the upper 20's and heavy rain late Sunday night, the recipe for avalanches was in place. A few hours later as the snow became heavier and warmer, it slid.

Two thousand feet higher and 30 miles further west, Stevens Pass was closed at 6:45 a.m. as the avalanche technicians saw the same weather conditions repeating. Avalanche chutes on the west side of the pass absorbed the heavy rainfall and released. Maintenance crews cleaned up the roadway and the pass reopened at 2:30 p.m. Avalanche Control Technician Mike Stanford characterized it as "Passive Control", "We didn't have to deliver any explosive charges - the rain flushed the chutes, naturally."

Back in Tumwater Canyon, avalanche chutes had completely emptied by 10 a.m. allowing crews to get back in and begin the clearing process with plow trucks, a scoop loader and one of the three Kodiak snow blowers from Stevens Pass. The first job, however, was removing the semi with its nose buried in a 17-foot high snow slide and the two other trucks behind that one. By noon, all three trucks and the patrol cruiser were out of the Canyon and on their way – none were seriously damaged.

By 4 p.m., US 2 through Tumwater was cleared, treated and opened for traffic.



December 2007 Storms:

WSDOT Fights Rain, Wind and Snow

While 2006-07 winter hit early, hard and often, winter 2007-08 waited until December to make its full presence known. Heavy snows, followed by hurricane force winds and torrential rain devastated several western Washington communities.

Starting Saturday Dec. 1, an intense storm brought heavy mountain and low land snowfall, extreme winds, and region wide rain and floods. Record rainfall amounts combined with melting mountain snows overwhelmed river banks and caused widespread flooding. The rain, combined with a melting snow pack, left a portion of I-5 in the Chehalis area of Lewis County under nearly 10 feet of water. Commute traffic in urban areas gridlocked as water overwhelmed drainage systems, pooled on roadways and washed out shoulders. Crews worked around the clock to help keep drivers safe and to get highways open to all traffic.

Coastal winds gusted between 80-120 mph (hurricane force) with sustained winds 40-50 mph on the South Washington and Northern Oregon coast. Trees, land slides and downed power lines also blocked many roads. Many coastal communities including Aberdeen and Raymond were isolated due to blocked highways, as were other communities on the Olympic Peninsula and in Lewis and Pacific Counties.

WSDOT has since reopened all 72 sections of roads which were closed or restricted as a result of mudslides, wind damage or flooding.

Mid-December's heavy mountain kept pass crews busy. More than 100 inches snow fell on I-90 Snoqualmie Pass from Dec. 15-31. WSDOT maintenance crews work 12-hour shifts day and night for several weeks, without a day off.



**Washington State
Department of Transportation**

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December 2007 Statewide Storm - Timeline

